

Merezhkovsky's *Simvoly* and the Early Development of Russian Symbolism

David N. Wells

The year 1892 saw a number of events in the Russian literary world that in retrospect can be seen as the beginnings of the new Symbolist age, not least the publication in *Severnyi vestnik* of Zinaida Vengerova's major article about the French Symbolist poets.¹ The two works of that year, however, that most clearly heralded the advent of the 'new art' in Russian literature itself were both by Dmitrii Merezhkovsky – first his book of verse *Simvoly* [Symbols], which was published on 17 February, and then his lectures 'O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniakh v sovremennoi russkoi literature' [The Reasons for the Decline and the New Currents in Contemporary Russian Literature], which were delivered in St Petersburg on 7 and 14 December, and published the following year.

By 1892 Merezhkovsky was already established as a poet. He had been publishing since 1880 and had issued his first collection, *Stikhotvoreniia (1883-1887)*, [Poems (1883-1887)] in 1888. This book substantially follows the civic tradition of the 1870s and 1880s, and indeed was well received by positivist critics. Even if they identified some awkwardness in Merezhkovsky's poetic manner they were inclined to ascribe this to inexperience – he was only 22 at the time of the publication of his first book – and were happy to speak of him in equal terms with other prominent poets of the day: Nadson, Minsky and Fofanov.²

¹ Zinaida Vengerova, 'Poety simvolisty vo Frantsii', *Vestnik Evropy*, 1892, no. 9, pp. 115-43. See Ronald E. Peterson, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1993, pp. 13-14.

² D.S. Merezhkovskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. K.A. Kumpan, St Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000, pp. 766-9.

The publication of *Simvoly* four years later marks a clear step outside the positivist tradition, and it is instructive to compare Merezhkovsky's achievement in this collection with his characterisation of what the new art should be in his critical writing. In 'O prichinakh upadka...', Merezhkovsky identifies three defining elements of the new art: mysticism in content, the use of symbols, and stylistic impressionism. These he associated in combination with contemporary French writing, and particularly Verlaine, but he was also keen to link them with a long tradition of idealism in art going back to classical Greece, and to highlight instances of the three elements separately in the Russian prose tradition of the previous generation – specifically in the writing of Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoevsky and Goncharov.³

How far does *Simvoly* meet Merezhkovsky's definition of the new art? Certainly, there is no difficulty in identifying 'mysticism in content'. Even in Merezhkovsky's first book, the civic themes are punctuated by a metaphysical view of the universe which goes beyond socio-political reality.⁴ As Briusov noted at an early point, while most of Nadson's followers were content to bemoan their inability to change Russian society, Merezhkovsky's poems also contain clear expressions of hope in the future.⁵ Moreover, in the section of *Stikhotvoreniia* called 'Poemy i legendy' [Longer poems and legends], where Merezhkovsky retells episodes from literature, mythology and history, a persistent theme is the transformative power of love.⁶

³ D.S. Merezhkovskii, *Estetika i kritika*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994, vol. 1, p. 174.

⁴ A.V. Uspenskaia, 'D.S. Merezhkovskii', in: D.S. Merezhkovskii, *Sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, St Petersburg, Folio-Press, 2000, pp. 34-5.

⁵ Briusov, *Dalekie i blizkie: stat'i i zametki o russkikh poetakh ot Tiutcheva d nashikh dnei*, Moscow: Skorpion, 1912, p. 59.

⁶ K.A. Kumpan, 'D.S. Merezhkovskii-poet (u istokov "novogo religioznogo soznaniia")', in: D.S. Merezhkovskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. K.A. Kumpan, St Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000, p. 30.

In *Simvoly*, this idealism is given an explicitly religious slant. The opening poem, ‘Bog’ [God],⁷ printed in italics to confirm its programmatic status, is a hymn of praise to a God who has given the speaker power to view the world anew: the transformation of everyday reality through faith, the revelation of the divine in everyday life, is a major theme in the book. The shift in Merezhkovsky’s thinking from positivism to mysticism is strikingly illustrated by the evolution of the earliest work contained in *Simvoly*, the drama ‘Vozvrashchenie k prirode’ [Return to Nature, no. 144], based on Calderón’s play, *La Vida es Sueño* [Life is a Dream]. Two versions of the drama are extant. In the original 1888 version the quest for the meaning of life played out in the main character, Sil’vio, is resolved in a commitment to hard work for social reform. By 1891 Sil’vio no longer sees this outcome as satisfactory, and the revised version ends with his discovery of God as the consequence of a revelation, after he has been persuaded to exercise mercy towards his enemies, by a character, Estrella, who can be seen as the embodiment of a mystical ‘feminine principle’.

The privileging of the irrational over the rational is also evident in the several *poemy* of contemporary life that are contained in *Simvoly*. In ‘Smert’ [Death, no. 112], for example, a positivist doctor is converted to belief in the absolute shortly before his death from illness. In the semi-autobiographical works ‘Vera’ [Vera, no. 114] and ‘Semeinaia idilliia’ [A Family Idyll, no. 143], a major theme is again the power of love to transform the main characters’ lives. ‘Konets veka’ [The End of the Century, no. 145], set in Paris, focuses in a similar way on the regenerative power of art. Commercialised Paris may be a city that has forgotten God, but at the same time, unlike St Petersburg, it is alive with intellectual fervour, exemplified by the religious

⁷ Merezhkovskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, no. 111. Hereafter, in-text references will be given to the poem numbers in this edition.

thinker, Renan, the new decadent beauty ('novaia krasota') of Baudelaire, and the linking of the themes of religion and love in the Salon of 1891.

Simvoly was originally entitled 'Nevedomomu Bogu' [To an Unknown God], referring to the altar to an unknown god discovered in Athens by St Paul.⁸ The relevant passage from the Acts of the Apostles is included as an epigraph:

...И став Павел среди Ареопага, сказал: „Мужи Афиняне, по всему вижу, что вы благочестивы.

Ибо, проходя и осматривая ваши святыни, я нашел жертвенник, на котором написано: *Неведомому Богу*. Сего-то, которого вы, не зная, чтите, я проповедаю вам”.

So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god". What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you'.⁹

This passage emphasises Merezhkovsky's focus in *Simvoly* on a religious apprehension of the world, by focussing on the importance of the relationship between the physical world and the unknown, and in particular on the need for interpretation to render the connection explicit. It simultaneously stresses the newness of a faith which he sees as emerging from the spiritual wasteland of utilitarianism.

The example of the altar to an unknown god also illustrates Merezhkovsky's conception of the Symbol. In 'O prichinakh upadka...' he defines this as an object or phenomenon in the real world which points to something beyond itself and beyond the immediate apprehension of the person observing it.¹⁰ The point is reinforced by the other epigraph to the collection, added in early 1892 at the same time the title was changed to *Simvoly*. This comprises two lines from Goethe's Faust: 'Alles Vergängliche / Ist nur ein Gleichnis'. As M. Koreneva has noted, even though Merezhkovsky's rendering, 'Vse prekhodiashchee / Est' tol'ko Simvol' [Everything

⁸ Kumpan, D.S. Merezhkovskii-poet', p. 52.

⁹ Acts 17:22-3 (Revised Standard Version)

¹⁰ Merezhkovskii, *Estetika i kritika*, p. 173.

transitory is merely a Symbol], which of course links the quotation with the title of his book and thus co-opts the authority of Goethe to Merezhkovsky's own project, later became accepted as something of a symbolist slogan, the translation of 'Gleichnis' by 'simvol' is idiosyncratic, and adds a layer of interpretation not present in the original German.¹¹ The primary meaning of 'Gleichnis' is 'image' or 'analogy' rather than 'symbol' and thus the word does not quite imply the imaginative reasoning normally implicit in the latter term. Moreover, a secondary, and now more common, meaning of 'Gleichnis' is 'parable' in a Biblical context,¹² and this is of particular relevance to Merezhkovsky's practical understanding of the concept of the literary symbol, again underlying its religious dimension.

It has been suggested that while Merezhkovsky knew what literary symbols should be, the expression of them largely escaped him in his poetic writing.¹³ And indeed, his preferred rhetorical figure is often the allegory rather than the symbol as such. In *Simvoly* Merezhkovsky continues to include a high proportion of 'legendy' [legends], in which literary or historical figures are presented in the light of his own preoccupation with the ideal, thus constituting a justification based on authority for his faith in the new art. Thus 'Frantsisk Assizskii' [Francis of Assisi, no. 113] provides a version of the story of St Francis, rejecting worldly pleasure for a life of redemptive poverty in tune with nature; 'Prorok Isaiia' [The Prophet Isaiah, no. 114] restates God's Biblical promise to save his chosen people from both political despotism and spiritual decline; 'Imogena' [Imogen, no. 139] retells a mediaeval French legend in which a pair of lovers escapes the restraints of a hostile world, being united finally in death. The focus on escape from a restrictive social environment into

¹¹ M. Iu. Koreneva, 'D.S. Merezhkovskii i nemetskaia kul'tura (Nitshe i Gete. Prizhanie i ottalkivanie)', in: *Na rubezhe XIX i XX vekov: iz istorii mezhdunarodnykh svyazei russkoi literatury: sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, Leningrad, 1991, p. 73-4.

¹² I should like to thank Petra Dumbell for pointing this out.

¹³ Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 30.

a place of independent thought is strengthened by the inclusion in *Simvoly* of Merezhkovsky's translation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (*Skovannyi Prometei*, no. 146), in which the titan is presented as a rebel against the authority of the gods, aspiring to improve the lot of mankind by providing access to the fire of the divine.

In the shorter poems of *Simvoly*, many of which were inspired by a trip to Italy in the summer of 1891, Merezhkovsky explores correspondences between the classical world and present day reality, and here he does come closer to a properly symbolist approach. In 'Panteon' [Pantheon, no. 121], for example, Merezhkovsky finds both the crucified Christ of the modern Church and the pagan gods co-existing in the physical space of the classical temple. Together, they constitute a summary of human aspirations towards the unknown. In 'Kolizei' [Colosseum, no. 123], inspecting the ruins of Roman grandeur, the lyric persona receives a momentary transfiguring vision of the 'nepobedimyi dukh velikogo naroda' [unvanquished spirit of a great nation], bringing the past into the present. In 'Sorrento' (no. 126), contemplation of the charms of the scenery evokes the speaker's first love as two separate absolutes merge in his mind through the actions of affective memory.

Briusov saw Merezhkovsky's poetry of the 1890s as foreshadowing all the major literary themes of the next fifteen years.¹⁴ In *Simvoly* in particular he perceived an identification with world culture which went far beyond the writing of the previous generation. Merezhkovsky's attempted synthesis of the pagan and Christian worlds in his Italian poems is a case in point. But Briusov also isolated Merezhkovsky's chief weakness as a poet – particularly as a symbolist poet – namely his predominant concern with the content of his writing over questions of form. In Briusov's words:

¹⁴ Briusov, *Dalekie i blizkie*, pp. 60-1.

‘Merezhkovsky looked on poetry as a means, and that is his sin before art’.¹⁵

Merezhkovsky’s poetry has a strong didactic impetus and except in rare cases such as the poem ‘Leda’ [Leda, no. 150] which was so admired by his Symbolist contemporaries,¹⁶ he was not able to imbue it with that stylistic impressionism which he identified as the third plank of the new art. A realisation of this was perhaps one reason why he virtually gave up writing poetry altogether after about 1900, preferring to concentrate his energies on the essay and the historical novel.¹⁷

All the same, there is evidence that when preparing *Simvoly* Merezhkovsky did in fact pay a considerable amount of attention to questions of poetic form. This is certainly the case at the level of the poetic book. Even the at the time enigmatic and provocative title *Simvoly* represents a conscious departure from the traditional designation of his earlier collection *Stikhotvoreniia*. In his first volume Merezhkovsky included virtually all the poems he had written between 1883 and 1887, and arranged them, conventionally, by subject matter and genre. Thus a first section containing civic poetry is followed by a second comprising nature poetry and a third of poems devoted to the theme of love. Then comes a section entitled ‘poemy i legendy’ containing larger scale narrative works, and the collection concludes with a series of ‘eskizy’ [sketches], containing shorter translations, imitations and occasional pieces, including for example a poem written on the death of Nadson.

With *Simvoly* the principle of composition is quite different. For one thing, Merezhkovsky omitted a significant number of the lyric poems he wrote between 1888 and 1891, notably his love poems of that period and a number of poems on

¹⁵ Briusov, *Dalekie i blizkie*, p. 63.

¹⁶ See Merezhkovskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, pp. 846-7.

¹⁷ See also A.G. Boichuk, ‘Merezhkovskii-lirik (1880-1890-e gg.)’, *Izvestiia Akademii Nauk. Seriia literatury i iazyka*, vol. 60, no. 5, 2001, p. 14.

aesthetic themes.¹⁸ This selection has the effect of concentrating the collection thematically on the specifically mystical and symbolic themes noted above. Secondly, although a large part of the collection is marked off as ‘pesni i legendy’, this division seems to be largely gratuitous since this section contains two of Merezhkovsky’s four *poemy* of everyday life and one of the works that falls outside it, ‘Frantsisk Assizskii’, is separately designated a ‘legenda’.

Thirdly, in its use of translation, the 1892 collection *Simvoly* differs significantly from both Merezhkovsky’s 1888 and 1896 collections. In these volumes, translations are published alongside Merezhkovsky’s original verse and have a merely supporting role. In the 1888 *Stikhotvoreniia*, for example, the sections devoted to civic verse and to love poetry include translations on related themes from, among others, Baudelaire, Musset and Henri Cazalis. Other translations, which fit less clearly into the thematic sections of the collection, including Merezhkovsky’s version of Baudelaire’s famous characterisation of the poet as an essentially isolated and misunderstood figure in his ‘L’Albatros’ [The Albatros], are relegated to a separate section at the end of the volume entitled ‘Eskizy’. The same pattern is repeated in Merezhkovsky’s 1896 *Novye stikhotvoreniia* [New Poems], where translations from Leopardi and Goethe are included as logical continuations of Merezhkovsky’s own ideas. In *Simvoly*, by contrast, both straight translations and ‘legendy’ are both much more closely integrated into the architectonics of the book, which is informed, indeed, not only by the presence of (often extensive) translated works, but also at multiple levels by the concept of translation more generally.

In fact the structure of *Simvoly* is tautly symmetrical. The two translated epigraphs together with the opening poem ‘Bog’ constitute a statement of intent

¹⁸ Kumpan, ‘D.S. Merezhkovskii-poet’, pp. 51-2.

which is matched by the equally programmatic concluding poem, a translation of Poe's 'The Raven', proclaiming both Merezhkovsky's allegiance to the broader European tradition and his commitment to modernism. The long poems which follow 'Bog' are matched by a series of long poems and translations which precedes 'Voron' [The Raven, no. 147]. The next layer in from either end comprises a selection of short philosophical poems and legends, and at the centre of the book is a lyric diary of Merezhkovsky's Italian journey, which epitomises his central theme of the correspondence between the past and the present, between paganism and Christianity, and foreshadows the lyric diaries of the next generation of symbolists. Translations and original works reinforce and extend each other, showing the values they represent to cut across boundaries of both time and space.

Although the poems of the Italian diary are original works and not translations, they derive a large part of their impact from the way in which they are juxtaposed to the translated works in *Simvoly*. Framed by two sequences of longer poems offering contemporary parables and allegorical legends derived from 'others' texts', they constitute a half-way house between the past and the present, in which the remnants of ancient Rome provide a point of contact between the transitory and the absolute. They are in a literal sense a translation of classical and early Christian Rome into the contemporary world.¹⁹ The link between the Italian poems and the translated works is reinforced by a certain continuity of thematic motifs. There are references to Prometheus, for example, both in the first poem of the sequence, 'Rim' [Rome, no. 120], and in 'Vezuvii' [Vesuvius, no. 129], in which 'ancient chaos', represented by the volcano, is shown as unable to subdue the Promethean spark of freedom in the

¹⁹ Merezhkovsky's view of Rome also both provides a link back to the legacy of ancient Greece and reflects the idealised northern European tradition of writing about Rome exemplified by Goethe's *Römische Elegien*. See Anna Frajlich, *The Legacy of Ancient Rome in the Russian Silver Age*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007, pp. 50-1.

human spirit. Most significantly, in 'Budushchii Rim' [The Future Rome, no. 122], the search for a new unifying faith to supersede the decayed Roman polity and a moribund Roman Christianity is expressed in terms of the 'unknown god' of St Paul in Acts. The Italian poems taken together provide an illustration of the transcendence of the transitory world which is promised by the epigraph from Goethe.

Briusov wrote of Merezhkovsky's poetic technique that he had achieved a transparency of form which rendered form invisible,²⁰ and it is true that he does not to any extent embrace the musicality that was advocated by Verlaine and actively pursued by Merezhkovsky's successors, including Briusov himself. Merezhkovsky keeps almost entirely to classical metres. His few experiments outside these limits into free unrhymed *dol'niki* during the period of *Simvoly* were in poems that fell outside the collection's thematic scope and were therefore excluded from it.²¹ Merezhkovsky apparently did not want to distract readers from the content of his writing by radical innovations in form.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the metrical repertoire of *Simvoly* shows that within the framework of the classical metres Merezhkovsky does in fact display a certain degree of inventiveness, particularly in comparison with his earlier collection. According to Mikhail Gasparov, the metres of all Russian poetry written between 1881 and 1890 are 53% iambic, 15% trochaic and 31% ternary, and the comparable figures for the period 1891-1900 are 53% iambic, 19% trochaic and 25% ternary.²² In his 1888 collection, *Stikhotvoreniia*, Merezhkovsky shows a clear preference for the iambic at the expense both of trochees and of ternary metres. The figures are 65% iambic, 12% trochaic and 19% ternary, suggesting in the context of the period in

²⁰ Briusov, *Dalekie i blizkie*, p. 64.

²¹ 'Svobodnaia liubov' (no. 233), 'Ty poklialas' men v liubvi...' (no. 240), 'Kto nam reshit' (no. 241).

²² Derived from M.L. Gasparov, *Sovremennyi russkii stikh: metrika i ritmika*, Moscow: Nauka, 1974, pp. 46-7.

which he was writing a high degree of metrical conservatism. In *Simvoly*, there is a distinct shift in metrical balance which brings Merezhkovsky much closer to the average for the decade: 51% iambic, 20% trochaic and 23% ternary, and implies a new openness to metrical variety. These figures are particularly noteworthy if compared with the statistics for Merezhkovsky's third, 1896, collection, *Novye stikhotvoreniia*. Although thematically aligned with the decadent movement, this volume – both in its title and its metrical composition – is again distinctly more conservative than *Simvoly* and than the totality of poetry of the period. The proportion of iambic poems has increased to 73%, while trochees have fallen to 14% and ternary metres to 10%.

	All Russian Verse (from Gasparov)		Merezhkovsky		
	1881- 1890	1891- 1890	Stikhotvoreniia (1888)	Simvoly (1892)	Novye Stikhotvoreniia (1896)
I2	0.16	0.52	--	--	--
I3	0.50	0.87	--	2.86	3.03
I4	17.83	26.43	9.09	14.29	39.39
I5	4.00	7.65	7.27	11.43	6.06
I6	18.60	8.70	24.55	11.43	7.58
IM	11.50	8.70	24.55	11.43	16.67
All Iambic	52.66	52.87	65.45	51.43	72.73
All Trochaic	15.50	18.78	11.82	20.00	13.64
All Ternary	28.50	25.74	19.09	22.86	10.61

Percentages of Poems Written in Different Metres

A closer look at the iambs shows that the poetry of the 1880s as a whole has a clear preference for tetrameters (18% of all poems) and hexameters (19%). In the

1890s the tetrameter was clearly dominant (26% of all poems).²³ This pattern is not reflected in any of Merezhkovsky's collections. In *Stikhotvoreniia* the majority of iambic poems are written either in hexameters or in lines with a varying number of feet (25% each). The remainder are divided more or less equally between tetrameter (9%) and pentameter (7%). In *Simvoly* the iambic verses are much more evenly spread: 14% tetrameter, 11% pentameter, 11% hexameter and 11% mixed length. One poem is written in iambic trimeter (3%), a metre not used in *Stikhotvoreniia*.²⁴ By contrast the iambic metres of *Novye Stikhotvoreniia* are much less varied. There is a preponderance of iambic tetrameter (39%), and while there is a significant number of poems with variable line length (17%), the figures for pentameter (6%) and hexameter (8%) have fallen correspondingly.

From this it is reasonable to conclude that in *Simvoly* Merezhkovsky was consciously aiming at metrical variety. And this is borne out by an examination of some other features of his versification. For example, Merezhkovsky's rhymes and stanza structures are not particularly striking in themselves, but nevertheless the same combination of rhyme scheme and metre is never repeated. Nearly all the poems in *Simvoly* are rhymed, but Merezhkovsky has one example of an iambic poem which is unrhymed, and one trochaic poem in which rhyme is confined to the second and fourth line of each quatrain.²⁵ There is very little dactylic rhyme, but again Merezhkovsky includes one poem where nearly all the rhymes are dactylic, and another which depends on a dactylic rhyme for closure.²⁶ It seems probable that a close study of rhythmic variation within the confines of specific metres would yield a similar pattern of considerable variation within a fairly conventional framework.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 'Khristos, angely i dusha' (no. 137)

²⁵ 'Vezuvii' (no. 129), 'Imogena' (no. 139).

²⁶ 'Sorrento' (no. 126), 'Kapri' (no. 127).

On those few occasions where Merezhkovsky does allow himself to repeat a metrical pattern it is possible to identify a thematic correlation between the different poems involved. For example, the poems 'Sorrento' (no. 126) and 'Kapri' [Capri, no. 127], both written in variable length anapaests, both also link a languid description of the Italian landscape with the theme of departed love. The first three of the Italian poems are all written in variants of unrhymed dactylic hexameter, a conventional choice for verse on classical themes, and one whose seriousness Merezhkovsky no doubt considered appropriate for introducing the theme of the unity of Christianity with the pagan world.

Although Merezhkovsky ultimately falls short of the innovativeness of poetic form he himself saw as an essential component of the new art, in *Simvoly* he does show considerable ingenuity in his manipulation of poetic form at the level of both the individual poem and the poetic book. Consequently, his legacy to the incipient symbolist movement in the 1890s was not only in outlining the theory and subject matter of the new movement, as is often maintained, but also in foreshadowing at least some of its achievement in the area of form.